



Airlifts run out of Scott lighten convoys' load

By Harry Levins

Post-Dispatch Senior Writer

Thursday, Dec. 16 2004

Scott Air Force Base is flexing its airlift muscle to fly supplies around Iraq - and foil some of the car bombs and roadside explosives that have killed soldiers and Marines.

The subject became big news last week with the uproar about the lack of armor for some Humvees in the landbound supply convoys. But the idea to rely more heavily on supply planes arose earlier.

"Back in the planning for the recent Fallujah operation, TransCom started looking at ways to mitigate the impact of the insurgents," says Army Lt. Gen. Robert T. Dail. He's the No. 2 man at TransCom - the U.S. Transportation Command, which has its headquarters at Scott.

"What came out of this was the idea that we'd start diverting more and more troops and commodities from ground convoys to airlift," Dail said this week in a phone interview from Washington, where he was on business.

The result: Over the last month or so inside Iraq, Air Force transport planes have hauled cargo that would have otherwise needed 400 trucks and 1,050 drivers, said a spokesman for the U.S. Central Command Air Forces at Shaw Air Force Base, S.C.

Each day, Air Force cargo planes haul an average of 450 tons within Iraq, said the spokesman, 1st Lt. Gary Arasin. "That's up about 30 percent from what it was in the period from July to October," he said. He added that if the fleet of airlifters held up, 600 tons a day was possible.

Each ton that goes by air is a ton that need not go the dicey way - by convoy.

Before the recent surge in airlift, big airlifters flew in from the United States and unloaded their cargo at just a couple of big airfields. From there, most of the cargo would move by road convoys to bases throughout Iraq.

Now, the big airlifters are toting the cargo to a bigger number of bases, cutting down on the mileage needed for convoys.

Meanwhile, Central Command is using its own fleet of 64 smaller cargo planes - the turboprop C-130 - to move cargo to still smaller bases with austere airstrips, thus cutting convoy mileage even more.

Traditionally, airlift has been rationed tightly. The big planes are scarce; the Air Force's Air Mobility Command has only about 125 models of its premier cargo plane, the Boeing C-17.

And - as any cargo shipper knows - moving a pound by air costs a lot more than moving it by ship to Iraq and then by truck around Iraq.

TransCom's Maj. Cindy Feldwisch lacked figures on the cost of moving a pound by truck. But she said that sending a single field ration - it's about the size and heft of a Stephen King novel - from the United States to Iraq on a ship costs 15 cents. Flying that same single ration costs \$7.

Given such costs, Dail said, airlift was previously limited to high-priority cargo - mostly people, plus crucially needed spare parts (like tank engines) and such protective items as body and vehicular armor.

But in the last month or so, Dail said, TransCom has let CentCom set the priorities on what goes by air - bulk ammunition, for example, or food, or barrier material. "And if it includes bottled water - well, at that point, we don't care about the cost," he said.

From Iraq, Army Lt. Col. Steven A. Boylan said by e-mail that before the recent airlift, the U.S. force in Iraq had sent out 200 to 250 convoys a day. He was unable to come up right away with the average figure for the last month or so.

Boylan wrote, "There are, of course, items that cannot be moved by air and still have to be moved by ground." In fact, he said, about three-quarters of the daily supply load of 20,000 tons goes by ground.

For example, Dail, the general, noted that as a rule, TransCom steered clear of trying to fly bulk petroleum products. "Not all convoy loads are being diverted to air," he said. "But in high threats, we looked at what we could do. And when the focus is on mitigating risk to our people, we're not worried about the price per pound."

Putting the planes in place took some juggling. From the United States, TransCom moved squadrons of C-17s and their bigger, older brothers, C-5s, to bases in Europe. From there, they fly back and forth to - and around - Iraq.

To fill in on the trans-Atlantic runs, TransCom lined up civilian charter flights.

Although the big airlifters are flying around Iraq, which is CentCom's turf, they're doing so under the control of the Air Mobility Command's Tanker-Airlift Control Center back at Scott, Dail said.

The Air Mobility Command is the aerial leg of TransCom's air-land-sea logistics operation. Like TransCom, the Air Mobility Command has its headquarters at Scott.

The idea to shift a big share of cargo to aircraft came up before the recent visit of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to the region. Rumsfeld fielded a tart question from a National Guard soldier about convoy safety, thus putting the issue on front pages around America.

Recent press accounts have given credit for the new airlift idea to the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. John Jumper, who visited Iraq early last month. Dail said TransCom planners had benefited greatly from Jumper's observations. But he said the planning had been in the works a few months before Jumper visited Iraq.

Dail called the effort in Iraq an example of the agility and flexibility that the services can show when they pull together jointly. "And it shows the tremendous capability of airlift - and reinforces the criticality of airlift in the future," he said.

The Air Force flies about 125 C-17s and has permission to buy 180 in all. But Dail's boss at Scott, Air Force Gen. John Handy, has said again and again that the United States needs 222 of the planes.

And Dail said Wednesday, "The number 222 is the *floor*; in our view."

Reporter Harry Levins
E-mail: hlevins@post-dispatch.com
Phone: 314-340-8144
